

Shifting from short term to long term action in post-COVID touristic cities.

Drift to exclusion in Seville and Malaga, Spain

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Abstract

This paper aims at recognizing the effects of social exclusion and the degradation process of public spaces and heritage environments in Spanish touristic destinations of Seville and Malaga. While it cannot be argued that after a lock-down as the experimented one, everything can return to the previous state, especially in environments where resilience has not been considered a value, in the early post-COVID lockdown days the mayors of these Andalusian cities reaffirmed the need to support the tourism sector as the only way to recover the economic breakout. We discuss the transformations that touristification and COVID-19 are driving into these cities, looking at the relaxed action of control and inspection on tourism activities and the offer of public "singular spaces" in the centre of the city for new activities related with the tourism industry and real estate speculation. Other European experiences are presented, showing that more focused measures on liveability and neighbour-centred recovery of urban life are possible.

Keywords

Urban tourism, Seville, Malaga, COVID-19, socio-spatial segregation, social exclusion.

1. Introduction

1.1. Subheading

In the last decade, the southern Spanish cities of Malaga and Seville have consolidated as destinations for cultural and urban tourism. The political commitment to position them as international destinations; rising the capacity of their transport infrastructure; increasing and diversifying tourist accommodation offer and focusing in the specialization of their historic centres; have transformed both cities and have made tourism a key factor in their post-industrial economy. However, at the same time, they have become un-resilient fragile environments, and a source of conflict and controversy. The rise of the state of emergency originated by the pandemic COVID-19 at the beginning of the year 2020, and the prohibition of national and international leisure travels during the following months is showing the negative effects of the transformation of cities in mono-functional centres at the service of the tourism sector and neoliberal policies.

Seville is the capital of Andalusia with 688.592 inhabitants, and Malaga, which is gaining an important weight as the centre of the Costa del Sol area, has 574.654 inhabitants (IECA, 2020). In the last decades, the number of tourists reaching both locations increased every year thanks to the democratization of flights and lodging, and the change in business model based on a mislabelled sharing economy. Malaga

quadrupled its tourist accommodation offer from 2013 to 2018 and 5,5 millions tourists visited the city in 2018. This figure has increased by more than 1.100% since 2005. In Seville, the number of tourists exceeded 3 millions in 2018 with a more moderate increase of 64% since 2009 (INE, 2020; CONTURSA, 2020).

The focus of this paper is not just (another) demonization of touristic dynamics -with a 14,3% of the GDP, the sector with the higher impact on Spanish economy- but aims at recognizing the wider experiences of social exclusion and degradation process of public spaces and heritage fuelled by the touristic dynamics in these cities and their possible evolution in a post COVID-19 framework.

The organization of this paper is as follows: in the first section, a review of selected literature is presented around the evolution of tourism gentrification and its effects on the resident population. Next, in the methodology section, we shortly discuss our approach to the transformations that touristification and COVID-19 are driving in Seville and Malaga, which are described in detail in the case studies section. The results will show the findings and conclusions originated by the experiences in these two Andalusia cities. Finally, we demonstrate how other cities around the world are trying to counteract the effects of tourism by improving social conditions, place attachment and habitability.

2. Background

During the last decade of the 20th century several authors such as Christopher Law (1993), provided initial thoughts on the topic of urban tourism. G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge (1990) deepened on the understanding of tourism and historic city. The evaluation of its social and physical impact was analysed by John Glasson (1995). The idea of tourism carrying capacities appeared at this moment, when the damages of urban tourism overcame the benefits. Some time later, Myriam Jasen-Verbeke (1998) defined “tourismification” as the irreversible processes of change that affect the forms and functions of historical cities. Following his own approaches from “the tourist city”, Dennis R. Judd (2003) considered that tourist enclaves facilitated the authoritarian control of urban space, modifying the consumption and replacing and suppressing local culture with Disney-like environments. Shortly later, Kevin F. Gotham (2005) defined the concept “tourism gentrification” using the socio-spatial transformation of New Orleans (USA) as a case study. Urban tourism was no longer an opportunity but a problem. Currently, the negative impact of tourism development is associated with terms such as tourism-phobia (Milano, 2019), over-tourism and overcrowding (Dodds & Butler, 2019). There is also an interest in understanding community resilience mechanisms in tourism destinations to strengthen their capacity to adapt to any sudden changes. In the framework of this paper, social resilience, as described by Adger (2006), is “the ability of groups to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change”. The premise that urban space is the result of each society, offers the possibility to envision new modes of control and relationships originated by the potential for thinking differently. For the same reason the notions of space as produced by means of different practices, strategies and circulations, and of space as multiple, are important shared starting points (Sorensen et al, 2010)

3. Methodology

The methodology employed looks at two main trends in Seville and Malaga in order to compare the evolution of the management of public resources in the past years and as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public space management and tourism policies are analysed through direct observation, quantitative data from grey literature (reports, working papers, statistics published by local and national agencies, regional departments and non-governmental organizations), and unstructured informal interviews with the agents involved. The analysis of the first actions promoted by public managers is documented mostly through their declarations reported on periodic newspapers.

4. Case studies

Seville and Malaga have a long history of tourism stretching back to the 19th century and lasting until today. In 1992 the Universal Exhibition consolidated Seville as a world tourist attraction. Its regional dimension, with an interesting historic centre and three UNESCO World Heritage Sites, inherited a land and air transport infrastructure that positioned it as an attractive destination for tour operators in the years to come. The end of the Global Financial Crisis in 2014, the explosion of the sharing economy linked with technological platforms such as AirBNB, and the democratization of international flights, the city started a profound transformation. Lonely Planet nominated Seville as the best city in the world to visit in 2017.

On the other end, tourism attractiveness of Malaga was diluted in the last decades of the 20th century due to the success of the Costa del Sol as an international sun and beach destination. In order to recover the city position as a tourist reference, Malaga was forced in the 1990s to develop a culturally oriented offer instead of competing with other nearby sun and beach destinations. Urban improvement plans led the city to renovate its historic centre and renew its image with cultural offerings. But the sun and beach model of tourism remains alongside it. Investments in infrastructure, especially in the port, have recently positioned Malaga as one of the most important cruise destinations in the Mediterranean Sea with an annual flow of 450,000 passengers.

4.1. Public spaces

Urban public spaces are really relevant in the south of Spain, as they are the main environments used by everyone for very different activities, and considered as the extension of the living room itself (Cimadomo and Martínez Ponce, 2014). Its gentrification started via EU funded urban renewal plans, at the beginning of the 90s in Seville, and starting the millennium in Malaga. The damage they caused to urban life and to the communal networks of these central neighbourhoods created the conditions and opened the way to their radical destruction that the growing touristification of city centres has only recently completed.

Similarly, certain apparently unrelated, but economically deregulating laws opened a path to both residential and commercial gentrification. On one hand, in 2009 the Law 25/2009, popularly known as Omnibus Law, allowed the opening of establishments without specific supervision and approval from the local authority, with the only requirement of a statement of responsibility from the entrepreneur. On the other hand, the de facto derogation of the old rental law in 2014, extremely protective with the tenant, avoided the transmission of low rentals from generation to generation. This combination forced the demise of both traditional commerce and residents unable to compete, the former with restaurants and global franchises, the later with touristic rentals, both imposed as unreflective and unsustainable monocultures, with a very high rate of failure and economic instability.

The disappearing proximity commerce is being replaced mostly by food and drink establishments, which occupy outdoors, more attractive for tourists than inner closed ones. Terraces and related furniture are then invading public spaces everywhere; they pay a ridiculous tax compared with indoor activities, and although city council regulations limit their surface area, they are exponentially increasing according to tourist demand (Figure 1). They expand into squares, gardens, in front of buildings' doors, privatising public spaces, increasing noise at all hours, threatening trees and monuments, even not allowing emergency access to ambulances and firemen. The city councils of Malaga and Seville are not taking action, as this could cause a negative impact on the local economy, and also a drop in their popularity among an ever-growing service sector, and citizens that increasingly perceive their city centres as leisure -and not residential- areas.

In the case of Malaga (but the experience is similar in many areas in Seville), the city council measured in

2001 and 2007 the noise levels on some of the main areas of the city centre. As a result, thirteen streets were assessed as Saturated Acoustic Zones (ZAS). Unexpectedly, both studies had no consequence in limiting the leisure activities and environmental noises in these areas. Faced with the passivity of the city council, the noise levels of 2015 were four times higher than 2007's ones. Eventually, under the regional legislation against the noise pollution in Andalusia, the municipality approved in 2018 the declaration of ZAS in the city centre, but it is rarely applied because of the pressure of the tourism industry (Marín, 2019). As a result, despite evidence and correlations, there are no direct effects of ZAS regulations on timetables of leisure activities and on the regulations of public spaces' occupation.



Figure 1. Messages from renowned architects published in Seville during 2019 Architecture week. The one here presented talks about the cost for bars and restaurants to occupy public space with terraces. Source: *Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Sevilla*.

4.2. Tourism policies

The administrative lack of control that subjugates public urban space to private activities, is also applied with other touristic-related activities, like vacation apartments. The inaction of the municipality brings an overwhelming 50% of estimated illegal offers in 2018 over a total of 7.423 apartments recorded by dataHippo scraping of AirBnB platform for Seville, a number which increased exponentially in the last years. Actually, in this city, only 5.925 apartments are registered in the Open RTA regional census, an increase experienced after several inspections led to sanction the owners of illegal apartments.

While inspection of vacation apartments is a responsibility of the regional government (overwhelmed by the exponential increase of apartments offered in the region), the policy applied by the Seville city council could be described at its best as negligent, as many illegal transformations, increasing in volume and height, can be observed all over the city. The strategy is based on a relaxed action of control and inspection. The most direct result is that the renovation of the inner tissue of the city is much easier and flexible, especially for the adaptation to the format of holiday apartments. When pressed by many local collectives, especially for the threats to local heritage, the Seville city council has timidly proposed counteractions, as the creation of a "tourism police" in 2019, a positive step in the inspection of the legality of the offer. This new branch of the local police will need a sufficient number of effectives to be really efficient. Another proposal to face the exponential offer of apartments was to change their

required use in the Seville Master Plan from residential to tertiary, directly limiting the number of possible establishments dedicated to this activity, but this has been proved as legally unviable.

During the 2019 World Travel & Tourism Council forum held in Seville, the mayor offered all void public spaces to the international investors attending the event. Together with empty spaces where to develop new residential estates, industrial or tertiary buildings, an important chapter focused on around 30 “singular spaces” in the city centre. Abandoned heritage buildings, which are at the centre of discussions about their possible recovery to promote social and cultural services that the dense historic quarter lacks, were offered as unique opportunities to the hotel industry (Europa Press, 2019). These would add to the creation of new luxury establishments dedicated to hospitality already fostered by the municipality. From 2018, fifteen luxury hotels have been approved and are planned to open for an estimated investment of 63 millions euros and around 900 new rooms, increasing the existing 23.000. The target audience of these offers leave also a clear urban model envisioned for the city: more luxury hotels and commercial areas fuelling more tourism and neoliberal approaches, increasing economic and social exclusion despite the many declarations to return symbolic spaces to the city and the need to attend SDGs.

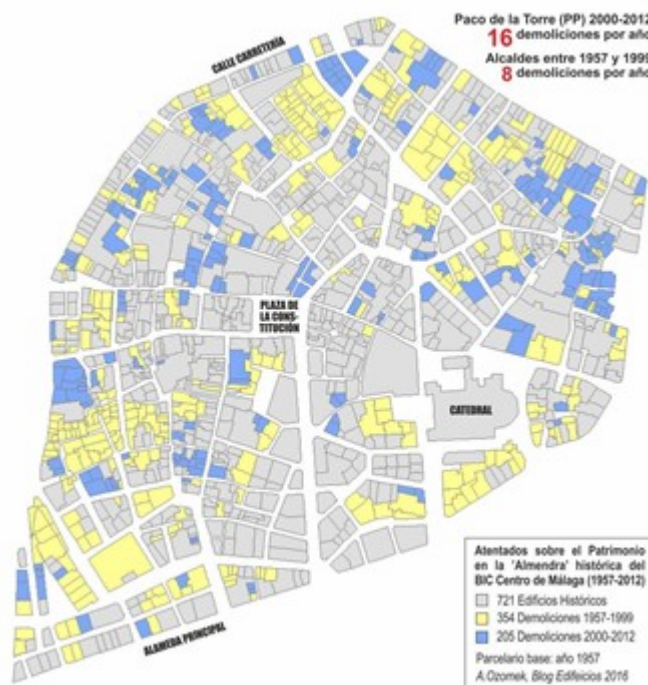


Figure 2. Demolitions in the Historical Centre of the city, showing its doubling rate per year under the current Mayor. Source: Anton Ozomek, “Edificios” blog.

In Malaga, from 1992 to 2015 a sequence of tourism-oriented strategic plans defined four long term strategic policies and their respective urban planning projects: Malaga Coastline City, Malaga Cultural City, Malaga Knowledge City and Malaga Revitalized City (Royo, 2015). As a consequence, the city centre has undergone a long process of urban regeneration that is still in progress, with continuous public-private investments in infrastructure and attractions in order to maintain the competitive position of Malaga in the tourism market. However, these urban policies have failed to meet social and cultural goals and were only at service of economic development objectives. In fact, the permanent urban refurbishment of the city is responsible for the deterioration and disappearance of its built cultural heritage, under protection by a lax application of local heritage regulations. As the activist Antón Ozomek explained recently, around 44,5% of historical buildings of the city centre might have been destroyed (Figure 2), more than a third of them in the last twelve years, in an accelerated ratio under the mandate

of the current Mayor (in charge since 2000). In the last decade the city council also supported and proposed, punctual interventions designed to act as nodes of gentrification. Firstly it started with the SoHo urban area, supposed to follow the path of its New York homonym. However, gentrification has recently begun to expand radially with several highly contested projects awaiting approval: the residential ex-REPSOL Area, reclaimed by local activists to be an urban forest; a Qatari founded luxury hotel in the Malaga bay, and several tertiary projects located in the port urban façade or in the terrains dedicated to the celebration of the City Fair, among many others. All of them permanently test the neoliberal nature of these urban renewals and show us how the goals of tourism policies have not changed in more than twenty years.

5. Results

The role of cities as socio-spatial scenarios, in which the contradictions of capitalist development are continually produced and fought out, has shown in Seville and Malaga how important the public space is. In the middle of the last decade, the first critical voices began to emerge from neighborhood movements warning of the negative effects associated with the neoliberal policies fostered by the municipalities of Seville and Malaga threatening the conservation and putting into value their public spaces and heritage.

The situation is quite paradigmatic in Malaga city centre. Its socio-spatial deterioration has led to a downward population trend during the last five years. Between 2014 and 2018 the number of inhabitants decreased 11% because of the pressure of tourist gentrification, among other factors, affecting also other nearby neighbourhoods (OMAU, 2018). In this way, the city centre was commercialised following the model of the shopping centre (Minguet, 2015), easily adapted to tourism, becoming an empty shell, an equidistant representative scenario of an idealized -but waning- past and the modern cliché of almost all touristic cities. Therefore, the impact produced by the imbalance of the economic investments is displacing the resident population and promoting its unequal spatial distribution (Figure 3).

Despite their different political discourses (being conservators in Malaga since 2000, or the progressive PSOE in Seville, governing between 1999 and 2011 and from 2015 onwards), both city councils have pursued the same goals. They use the attraction of any kind of event (i.e. World Travel & Tourism Global Summit held in Seville in 2019; Film Arts Academy ceremony in Malaga in 2020 and 2021) as a way of feeding the attraction and glamour needed to keep the permanent number of tourists growing. The high costs needed to sponsor these events are camouflaged by the economic return that supposedly benefits the whole community. Despite this propaganda, a result of the Luxembourg Income Study Research Hub shows that 2016 income, compared to before the crisis of 2007, has increased only for the top 1% of the population, having fallen for the bottom 40% and being median income quite the same (Figure 4). The increasing touristic revenues, which are boosted by public investments, are not redistributed equitably. The weakest labour sector does not benefit particularly from public investments, but suffers from their consequences.

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Figure 3. Left: “Surviving at the city centre” announcing the 3rd Photography Competition of the Residents Association of the Historic Centre of Malaga. Right: “La Rendición” by Alejandro Villén. Based on Velazquez’s “The surrender of Breda”. Source: Residents Association of the Historic Centre of Malaga.

Real income change across percentiles of the income distribution:
Spain 2007-16

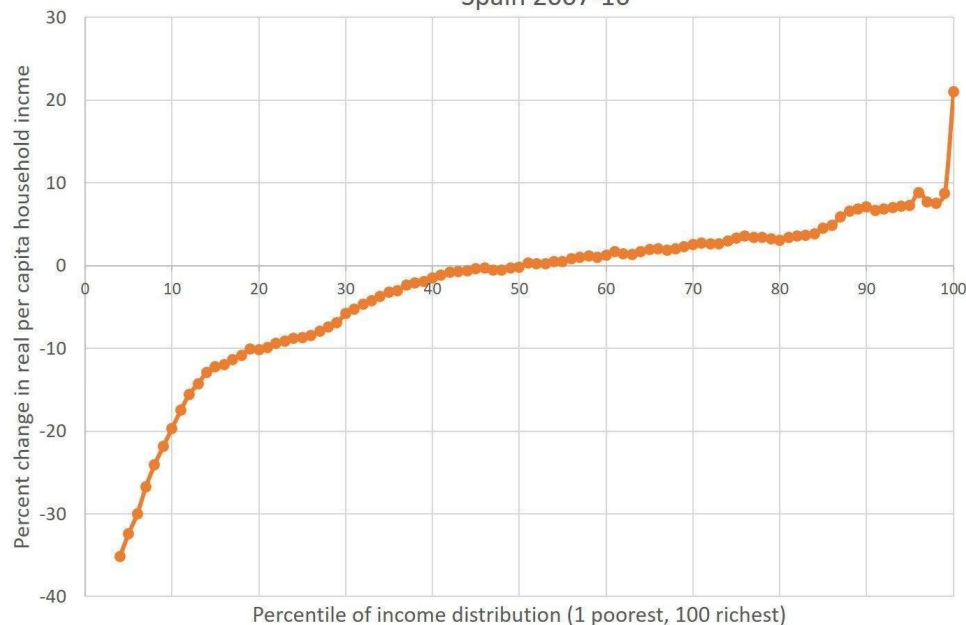


Figure 4. Real income change across percentiles of the income distribution in Spain (2007-16). Source: Luxembourg Income Study Research Hub.

Nowadays, the effects of the pandemic are strongly affecting Spanish GDP, with a year-on-year loss of 18,5% for the second quarter of 2020, second only to the UK. Recent statistics on tourism in Spain shows a 97,7% drop in foreign visitors in June (compared with the same month of 2019, when 8.833.893 tourists came to Spain) and a 78,7% in July (from 9.887.047 tourists) (INE, 2020). Also, the second wave of infections that is hitting the country and the following recommendations of many governments not to visit Spain, or requiring quarantine for people coming from this country, suggest that the expected economic recovery of Spain has abruptly been stopped on account of the decrease of tourist flows. As a

result of this situation 23,67% of touristic apartments in Seville and 20% in Malaga haven't received tourists, or have been removed from rental portals like Airbnb and Vrbo. According to the real estate portal Idealista, long term rental offers in July increased 86,7% in Seville and 109,3% in Malaga, compared to July 2019 (Pereira, 2020). This data can be read as a shift from short term to seasonal and long-term rents that in Spanish law are forced to last a minimum of five years, relaxing and balancing the housing rental market. As a consequence, it becomes evident the unsustainability of a monothematic touristic model which entails serious socio-economical risks for a country.



Figure 5. The main strategies defined in the Sevilla Impacto Turismo Plan. Source: Seville City Council.

Unfortunately, reactions to this situation immediately followed with short-sighted measures emphasizing the fastest economic recovery of the same model described above. The Seville city council soon implemented the *Plan 8 Sevilla Impacto Turismo*. This plan is based on three pillars in order to support the reactivation of local (touristic) economy: attracting national tourism, keeping planned conferences and congresses, and keeping the 120 pre-COVID connections existing before the cessation of international flights (Figure 5). With an a priori life expectancy until the end of 2020, it has a budget of 2 millions euros, and once again shows how the only model envisioned for the city by its politicians is based on the *tourism industry*, a fragile and volatile model which does not guarantee a sustainable economy. Malaga City Council has developed a similar tourism incentive policy in the historic city centre. The initiatives relate to free access to museums, public transport and municipal car parks in exchange for a minimum consumption stipulated by each business in the city centre. In addition, there are other initiatives of a fiscal nature, training and flexibility to improve the percentages of economic exploitation of the tourist sector. The mayor has recently rejected the need of rethinking this urban model, denying the "pathological dependence" on tourism reported by the Urban Environmental Observatory of his own municipality (Cadena SER, 2020).

6. Discussion

Quarantine has been implemented to separate physically one from the other, interrupting common relations and flows that also increased the most relevant aspect of Secchi's "new urban question", related with social inequalities (Bianchetti, Boano and Di Campli, 2020; Secchi, 2013). Focusing on the case of tourism, we could argue that COVID-19 and its imposed quarantine also allowed the resident population to recognize itself enjoying the city because of the paralysis of the tourism sector. The first days after the lockdown were an unrepeatabable chance to freely walk around, meet at open, non-

saturated public spaces, and enjoy silence in the same historic centre that used to be collapsed by a noisy, inattentive, misguided crowd of tourists.

The city councils of Seville and Malaga did not take into account the value of this exceptionality. In fact, as previously exposed, since the end of the lockdown they are tending to feed the pre-pandemic status quo with public policies. Consequently, many bars and restaurants' terraces soon started to operate again, immediately restoring the privatization of public spaces, noise, etc. In addition, in order to keep reasonable incomes with fewer tourists, they were allowed to further expand themselves over the already squeezed public space to the point of risking the resident's health (Miranda, 2020). As Secchi (2013) explains, every crisis that happened in the past significantly transformed the city, in its spatial structure, in its way to work, even in the relations between social sectors. Therefore, should we expect that this health crisis would also transform the city of Seville and Malaga? It cannot be argued that after a lock-down as the experimented one, everything can return to the previous state, especially in environments where resilience has not been considered a value. Meanwhile other experiences show that more focused measures on liveability and neighbour-centred recovery of urban life are possible.

Barcelona city council is trying to control and regulate, since the approval in 2017 of the PEUAT (Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodation, in its Spanish acronym), the conditions of accommodation and to reduce its impact in the citizens' life. It comes to reinforce and coordinate with the previous (2016) Housing Plan which included a wide range of measures to facilitate access to adequate housing to the citizens, not only with an enviable number of municipal and public-private housing promotions, but also with some other measures, as a control -and possible penalty- of void houses, an increasing stock of municipal price-controlled tenements, etc. The Housing Plan produced interesting reports including exhaustive data and figures regarding the matter and the achievements obtained each year, and periodical reports of the figures of both the legal renting apartments and illegal ceased ones, which could be denounced on a web page.

The mayor of Lisbon, another city that experienced a skyrocketing number of tourists in the last years and consequently an increase of cost and scarcity of long-term rentals in the free market, promoted the reduction of short-term rentals after COVID-19 through a Secure Income programme. The municipality offered to rent between 1,000 and 2,000 apartments for five years directly from the landlords, who also receive taxation perks. These apartments are turned back on the rent market as "safe-rent" homes for key workers, middle-class sectors and students, with a price limited to 30% of their incomes. The declaration of the mayor put this action in the frame to support families who found their incomes truncated with the limitations to tourists, but also as a first step to regulate short-term rentals, and to bring back neighbours to the city centre.

While the previous experiences presented are trying to impact on the number of short-term rentals as a way to limit tourism and a first step to recover a living tissue in the core of touristic cities, the approach of Fairbnb.coop is different, focusing on the promotion of sustainable tourism. Fairbnb.coop, an ethical holiday rental website, at first sight could seem not different from other traditional rental platforms. What differentiates this non-profit driven cooperative is the declaration that half of its incomes will be donated to local social projects early identified by the landlords. Other differences reside in the limit of one rental offer for hosts, in the effort to keep away properties owned by businesses; a transparent share of data with local authorities and the effort to collaborate in the definition of fair regulations where missing. While at the moment the platform offers only a limited number of apartments in few European cities, it has to be checked how it will behave in the future. The idea aims at tweaking the major concerns arose with Airbnb and other rental platforms, also if it has to be remembered that the latter were born with similar collaborative ideals, making it possible for everybody to earn extra incomes offering free rooms for rental in one's own house.

This type of existing policies shows that ameliorating the house market and making it more accessible and away from the speculative market is not a question of possibilities but one of wills. But perhaps, to solve the housing problem requires a huge amount of will (as in the cases presented), and it can be argued that smaller cities could not afford it. In the same vein, it could be argued that regulations for the size and use of terraces or control on the acoustic conditions of the establishments already exist, but they are mostly ignored. The priority of the mayors of Seville and Malaga seems to be the market and not the citizens. But the pandemic lockdown has shown that a new way of planning cities is needed, where co-participation and new forms of use and management of public spaces are required. Of equal relevance is the way to act, as the lack of will from the public institutions has been demonstrated: new imaginative and shared models should be reevaluated, if we don't want to continue to be slaves of neoliberalism.

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